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Source: *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter, 1991), pp. 1-19

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of the University of Oregon

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1770990>

Accessed: 01-02-2019 02:12 UTC

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AMY MANDELKER

## A Painted Lady: *Ekphrasis* in *Anna Karenina*

COMMENTING ON Tolstoy's treatise on aesthetics, *What Is Art?* (*Chto takoe iskusstvo?* 1897) John Bayley complained that "all treatises on art are unsatisfactory" (235).<sup>1</sup> Extending this statement into a Tolstoyan aphorism might yield the observation that "all treatises on art are unsatisfactorily alike; all works of art are treatises *on* art in their own way." While the current vogue in literary theory emphasizes a perception of the text as self-referential and meta-textual as a whole, there are also specific moments in literary texts that are consciously so. One of these is the *topos* of *ekphrasis*, most succinctly defined as a literary description of a visual work of art. The power of the ekphrastic moments in *Anna Karenina* motivated Bayley to draw the conclusion that Tolstoy's views on art are "expressed more powerfully in the narration of *Anna* than in his theoretical statements on art" (235). If, as Gary Saul Morson has recently argued, *War and Peace* is a work concerned with the problems of representation and the formation of false narratives, *Anna Karenina* may be read as a companion piece, concerned with the creation of false art and vision.

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<sup>1</sup> Brief versions of this paper were delivered at the Tolstoj Symposium, Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages, December, 1987, San Francisco, California, and at the Slavic Seminar, Columbia University, March 4, 1988. To accommodate those who do not read Russian, I have cited from existing translations which I have silently corrected when necessary, relying on the authoritative 90-volume Jubilee Edition of the Complete Works of Tolstoy. Citations directly to the Russian text indicate the translation is my own. Gary Saul Morson's close reading of this article and invaluable constructive criticism stimulated a fuller elaboration of my argument. I must also express my gratitude to the students in my graduate seminars on "Tolstoy and the European Novel" at Columbia and the CUNY Graduate Center, who provided a stimulating forum for dialogue and discussion. The comments and encouragements of friends and colleagues who read this article in various stages also deserve thanks: Pamela R. Bleisch, Mary Ann Caws, Gina Kovarsky, and Cathy Popkin.

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*Anna Karenina* is Tolstoy's only major work in which an artist appears engaged in the creative process, and where the narrative is suspended in favor of *ekphrasis* and for a discussion of the nature and purpose of art. As character and representation of character are the central concerns of the novel, it is not surprising that portraiture is the thread that stitches together the themes of aesthetics and representation. Without exception the paintings shown are portraits: three portraits of Anna (Wronsky's, Mikhailov's and one by a "society painter"). Mikhailov's painting of "Pilate's Admonition" is essentially a group portrait where the characterizations of Christ, Pilate, Judas, and John the Baptist are emphasized over the narrative aspect of the depicted scene. Mikhailov's sketch of a "man in a rage" and the painting of two boys fishing completes the list. The art of portraiture and the framing of the personality in settings, reflections, and works of art are tropes that negotiate the issue of the aesthetic, artistic, and conventional representation of the self. Portraits become illustrations of the problem of the material embodiment of the spiritual, interrogating the theme of the individual's conflict between the mind and the body, between the imperatives of the spirit and the demands of the social mask or role imposed by convention and representation.<sup>2</sup> Tolstoy's Neoplatonism extends to his ekphrastic presentation of characters' private visions, images, self-portraits, and landscapes that aestheticize and formalize their quests for knowledge. *Anna Karenina* thus becomes an *ars emblematica*, where the imposition of frames finalizes meaning, and wherein artistic vision serves as emblem, *imago*, or icon of the spiritual, or conversely acquires the demonic character of profane or pornographic representation.

Roland Barthes has described *ekphrasis* as "a brilliant detachable morsel [of description], sufficient unto itself" introduced solely for the "pleasure of verbal portraiture" (88). His surprisingly limited definition disregards the potential of *ekphrasis* to function, not just as a description of art, but as art criticism and meta-aesthetic discourse. In the ekphrastic moment, the stilling of the narrative flow required for ekphrastic exposition is re-narrativized in the course of temporally unfolded descriptions of the visually discrete work of art, as in Homer's description

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of the description of personality and portraiture preoccupied Tolstoy in his earliest writings, as he comments in his diary of 1851: "It seems to me that actually to describe a man is impossible . . . words give no understanding of a man but make a pretense of delineating him while more often than not only misleading [the reader]" (4 July, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 46: 67). Tolstoy then proceeds to describe a man, in a manner reminiscent of the salon game of "portrait moral." First, he relates various aspects of the man's reputation and others' impressions of him, then describes his appearance through an ekphrastic word-portrait, and finally evokes the impression the man made on him in person. Tolstoy employs the same procedure in the multiple framing of Lyovin's encounter with Anna, see below, 9-11.

of Achilles's shield. This paradox of modes alerts us to problematic conventions in the artistic encoding of meaning, the subject of the debate surrounding the precept *ut pictura poesis*.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the description of a work of art in a literary text occupies a privileged space in the narrative. Since *ekphrasis* specifically juxtaposes visual and verbal modes, it also debates the phenomenological issue in traditional aesthetics as to whether or not poetry constitutes thinking in images. This view implies that the contemplation or creation of images facilitates the primary cognitive processes associated with the pre-verbal or extra-verbal states of childhood, mysticism, and ecstatic visions. The association of literary pictorialism with primal vision and epiphany affects our perception of other descriptive moments in literature that organize visual perceptions in a pictorial manner. Such "framed" and "frozen" moments reflect the degree to which art informs and forms our vision, and the extent to which vision is valorized as the conveyor of untranslatable and unnamable spiritual grace. The capacity of verbal texts to create vivid pictorial effects is seen as a fulfillment of *enargeia*, expressed by the term *hypotyposis*, which Barthes claims may serve to "mettre les choses sous les yeux de l'auditeur, non point d'une façon neutre, constative, mais en laissant à la représentation tout l'éclat du désir . . ." (87). When the hypotyposis is self-conscious, that is, aesthetically framed, literary pictorialism can become a commentary on all visual practice. Thus, as Mary Ann Caws suggests, this technique

makes a statement of coherence against the narrative flux and against the flux of our own time, so that our reading of frames and of the framed passages . . . is the model of not just reading, but of what, while reading, we live. (30)

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<sup>3</sup> Recent studies and bibliographies on the topic *ut pictura poesis* may be found in Dolders, Dundas, Gelley, Graham, Krieger, Markiewicz, and Park. The notion that poetry is like painting developed from a casual analogy in Horace's *Ars Poetica* into a precept of aesthetics and literary theory. The classical emphasis on *mimesis* or imitation as the ultimate goal of a work of art informed critical debate on the capacity for representation in the two arts. The accepted notion, as stated by Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime* and later developed by Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), exalted the capacity of painting to represent things themselves, while poetry could only "affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves" (Burke 172). During the Romantic period, the shift in cultural emphasis from imitation to expression resulted in a corresponding shift in the analogy to one between music and poetry (*ut musica poesis*); this aesthetic persisted throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the neo-Romantic Symbolist precept "de la musique avant toute chose," exemplified in the syncretism of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which Lyovin criticizes. In light of Tolstoy's later statements on aesthetics, it is suggestive that the work criticized here is a version of *King Lear*; Tolstoy's well-known antipathy to this drama automatically precludes any possible success for Balakirev's program. In fact, Lyovin forgets the intended program as soon as the music begins.

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The fact that we organize our experiences into narratives and our views of the world into pictures exposes us to the risk of being poor storytellers and mediocre artists. At worst, we are victims of the clichés and conventions that tell us how to make pictures; at best, our artistic structuring of experience lends coherence and epiphanic illumination to otherwise random and chaotic experience, and a sense of aesthetic closure weaves together the loose and unfinished, raveled threads of life. The danger is in the enclosure that constricts and the frame that misrepresents.

A desire for coherence in the presentation of self, the quest for psychic unity and meaning in existence, and the urge to contextualize life increase the desire for the end of the story or the frame of the picture. Thus, ominously, the desire for a finished self-portrait or a comprehensive icon is subtended by the death instinct, as critics like Peter Brooks have noted. As Sartre commented about the process of writing his autobiography, “I became my obituary” (171). Or, in Bakhtin’s description, any portrait presents

[f]inalized, or “closed” individuals. It presents the person exhaustively; he is already completely there and cannot become other. [The portrait shows] the faces of people who have already said everything, who have already died [or] may as well have died. (115)

The main protagonists of *Anna Karenina*, Anna and Lyovin, court death and contemplate suicide at moments in their quests for an ultimate meaning that would end the necessity for asking questions. Their desire to frame and compose their views of self and their interpretations of life according to artistic models suggest that we may read them as artist figures. Both Anna and Lyovin are authors, although their books remain unfinished. Anna willfully completes her self-portrait by committing suicide, imposing her own aesthetic constraints on her presentation of self. In the essential contrast of the novel, Lyovin leaves his narrative unfinished and open-ended. This contrast is most obviously based on gender difference in social constraints; thus, Anna’s suicide belongs to the tradition of those heroines who “choose to die in order to shape their lives as a whole. . .” (Higonnet, “Speaking Silences” 69). At the crucial moment when the trajectories of the two protagonists’ lives intersect, it is a great artist’s portrait of Anna that brings the two together in a subtle anagnorisis of kinship and difference.

Lyovin’s viewing of Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna turns Lyovin into an art critic and a voyeur; he is also the observer in the text who directs our gaze and makes us aware of our own voyeurism. It is important, therefore, to understand Lyovin’s well-elaborated views on art, presented in a passage rarely discussed by critics of the novel. In chapter 5, part 7, Lyovin attends a concert “in the modern style” of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the piece is Balakirev’s *King Lear of the Steppe*).

During the *entr'acte*, Lyovin enters into a debate with his friend:

Lyovin maintained that the mistake of Wagner and all his followers lay in their trying to take music into the sphere of another art, just as poetry goes wrong when it tries to paint a face, which is what should be left to painting, and as an instance of this mistake he cited the sculptor who carved in marble certain shadows of poetical images flitting around the figure of the poet on the pedestal. 'These shadows were so far from being shadows that they were positively clinging to the ladder,' said Lyovin. The comparison pleased him, but he could not remember whether or not he had used the same phrase before . . . (714)

Lyovin is right to question the originality of his statement. In fact, his habit of unconscious quotation overtakes him in this section of the novel, where the pressures of urban social life seduce him into a constant theft of *bons mots* in pursuit of the appearance of wit. Earlier he quips that punishing a revolutionary by exiling him to Europe is like casting a pike back into the water, later realizing that he had "borrowed" the *bon mot* from an acquaintance who had read it in a newspaper article that in turn quoted from Krylov's fables. Lyovin's indictment of the sculptural (material) representation of poetic (intangible) ideas is similarly not original but derivative: it strongly echoes, at several points, Lessing's *Laokoön* (1766), the classic polemic on the Horatian precept *ut pictura poesis*.

Lyovin wants to argue against the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* yet his sculptural example as he describes it does not aptly illustrate the separateness of painting (specifically, portraiture) from poetry. The sculptural example is effective only when read against the intertext of *Laokoön*. Lessing's discussion focused on the critical controversy over whether Virgil's description of *Laokoön*'s agony was antecedent to or derived from the classical sculpture of *Laokoön* being devoured by serpents, and concluded with his famous theses on the need to modify the subject to accommodate different modes of representation. Imitating Lessing, Lyovin employs a sculptural work for his example, but he replaces the figure of the high priest, *Laokoön*, with the figure of a poet. Lyovin describes the sculptural work as hampered by clinging shadows which were meant to represent "poetic ideas." We may see the shadows in terms of the *Laokoön* sculpture as a recasting of the serpents that encircle *Laokoön* and whose different positions in the two works (poem and sculpture) form the basis for much of Lessing's argumentation. In Virgil, the serpents mount *Laokoön*'s body and engulf him totally:

They wind around his waist and twice around his throat. They throttle him with scaly backs; their heads and steep necks tower over him. (2.305-07)

As Lessing points out, a literal rendering of this description would have

obliterated any visual expression of Laokoön's agony; therefore, the sculptor winds the serpents about Laokoön's wrists and ankles, "parts which might be concealed and compressed without injury to the expression . . . [and which] also convey the idea of arrested flight . . ." (Lessing 39).

Lyovin's clinging shadows illustrate the problem of the embodiment of the spiritual in the material: the indefinite, cerebral creative ideas of the poet are invisible mental constructs manifest only in the artist's own work, which appear ridiculous when represented as concrete objects. Lyovin's image evokes Lessing's indictment<sup>4</sup> of the artistic conventions employed for representing the cloud of invisibility cast over the hero by the *deus ex machina* in classical canvases: the solution, a "cloud" painted to one side of the "invisible" figure, Lessing argued, was beyond the limits of painting. His cloud is a hieroglyphic, a purely symbolic sign, which does not make the rescued hero invisible, but simply says to the observers, 'You are to suppose this man to be invisible.' It is no better than the rolls of paper with sentences upon them which issued from the mouths of personages in the old Gothic pictures. (80-81)

The echo of *Laokoön* in Lyovin's brief treatise on aesthetics is enhanced by the subject of Lyovin's statue: a poet, surrounded by his poetic ideas, the creator about to create and seeking an appropriate embodiment of his artistic vision. The choice of flitting shadows to represent creative inspiration suggests a demonic rather than a divine source, and raises the question of good and evil in creation.

Lyovin's illustration thus subtly debates the question of how or whether art may achieve its theurgic potential. This issue is of central importance in the most sustained *ekphrasis* in *Anna Karenina*, the description of Mikhailov's painting of "Pilate's Admonition." Mikhailov's problem, as Anna, Vronsky, and Golenishchev perceive it, is how to represent a human, real Christ, or whether such a representation is possible or even desirable: can a spiritual entity be embodied in material terms? What demonic or divine intervention is required for such a manifestation? Doesn't the material representation deform or defame the spiritual?<sup>5</sup> Lessing's presence in Tolstoy's text is discernible in the Neoplatonic distinction formulated between Vronsky's dilettantism and Mikhailov's genius. In *Laokoön*, Lessing differentiates between works of art that imitate nature directly and those that imitate other works of art (imitations of imitations). The latter, Lessing argues, utterly

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<sup>4</sup> Lessing casts the issue of invisibility in Neoplatonic terms as the separation of upper and lower spheres: "with the loss of all distinction to the eye between the visible and the invisible beings, all the characteristic traits must likewise disappear, which serve to elevate the higher order of beings above the lower" (77).

<sup>5</sup> For an enlightening discussion of these chapters in relation to Tolstoy's aesthetics and *What Is Art?*, see Bayley, chapter 6.

degrade the artist; primacy of *mimesis* is thus the criterion by which genius is distinguished from talent. Therefore, Vronsky is automatically indicted as an epigone who cannot discriminate between truth and illusion (we recall the memorable analogy of a man caressing a doll as if it were a real woman) and who therefore paints after the style of other artistic schools:

He appreciated all kinds [of art], and could have felt inspired by any of them; but he had no conception of the possibility of knowing nothing at all of any school of painting, and of *being inspired directly by what is within the soul*, without caring whether what is painted will belong to any recognized school . . . (489, emphasis added)

In contrast, Mikhailov paints directly from the heart: “I cannot paint a Christ who is not in my heart” (499), drawing inspiration from “inner vision” (painting is “removing the coverings” from the true insight) while “[Vronsky] drew his inspiration, not directly from life, but indirectly from life embodied in art” (489). Thus it is that Vronsky’s portrait of Anna (“in Italian costume in the French style”) fails and remains unfinished, while Mikhailov succeeds in creating a portrait that “impressed everyone, especially Vronsky, not only by its likeness, but by its characteristic beauty,” and by its revelation of “the very sweetest expression of [Anna’s] soul” (501).

In his study of *ekphrasis* in the European novel, Mack Smith determines that Mikhailov’s portrait is successful because it lives, and “stands out from its frame” (725). This organicist valuation of the creative process, which invests the created object with a life of its own, is exemplified in Mikhailov’s experience with his sketch of a “man in a violent rage,” onto which a drop of wax falls. The new shape lent to the figure by the drop of wax inspires Mikhailov. As he works, “The figure, from a lifeless imagined thing, had become alive and could not be changed. The figure lived, and was clearly and unmistakably defined” (463). Mikhailov’s view of the creative process, “removing the coverings from already existing figures” is counterpoised to Vronsky’s belief in “technique.” Victor Terras has glossed this passage as “a classical statement of the Neoplatonic organic concept of the creative process” (282). In his study of *War and Peace*, Morson terms this process “creation by potential,” a notion equally opposed to the classical, programmatic/algorithmic principle of composition and to the romantic conception of poetic madness or the frenzy of inspiration, divine or demonic possession. The autonomous, organic status of the art work suggests that the artist is not in full control of his text, that the work evolves autonomously and organically, developed by the artist’s delicate manipulations, as Plotinus’ sculptor “liberated” his vision of Beauty from the prison of the unformed block of marble.



While Tolstoy retained his belief in organicist aesthetics in his post-conversion writings, many critics have felt compelled to defend Mikhailov's status as an artist of genius and the art of *Anna Karenina* on religious as well as aesthetic grounds, seeking validation from Tolstoy's post-conversion dicta on the topic of Christian art. Richard Gustafson has rejected the traditional sharp severing of Tolstoy's oeuvre and aesthetics into two radically alienated phases, proposing instead a consistent evolutionary path in Tolstoy's thought. Reading the ekphrastic passages of *Anna Karenina* against Tolstoy's post-conversion anti-treatise on aesthetics, *What Is Art?*, confirms Gustafson's view of one Tolstoy, and supports the hypothesis that his later pronouncements on art are implicit in the earlier art work.

Most important for our considerations are the definitions Tolstoy offers in *What Is Art?* of true Christian art as opposed to false, pernicious art, categories he locates entirely outside the classical doctrine of *dulce et utile*. Tolstoy expresses three primary principles of true Christian art in *What Is Art?*:

- 1) that an artist is successful if he is able to convey his own genuine feelings through the force of his work (the work's "sincerity," or the so-called "infection" theory)
- 2) that art is successful only if it is universal, that is, accessible to everyone, regardless of class, education, formation, culture, etc.
- 3) that art is Christian, not necessarily in its choice of Christian or Biblical subject matter, but in its ability to inspire brotherly love.

If we evaluate the three paintings by Mikhailov that we are shown in *Anna Karenina* according to Tolstoy's own aesthetic principles, we find that the painting of "Pilate's Admonition," despite its Biblical subject matter and Mikhailov's sincerity, fails because, by Mikhailov's own admission, it requires education to understand it; even then, Vronsky and Anna do not fully appreciate it. By contrast, the less ambitious "secular" painting of two boys fishing in a stream is a success, not because it "infects" the viewers with the bucolic mood of a lazy afternoon fishing expedition, but because it appeals to a wide audience and, most importantly, stimulates the viewer's desire to share the thoughts and experiences of another:

Two boys were angling in the shade of a willow tree. The elder had just dropped in the hook and . . . was entirely absorbed in what he was doing. The other . . . was lying in the grass leaning on his elbows, with his tangled, flaxen head in his hands, staring at the water with his dreamy blue eyes. What was he thinking of? (500)

By Tolstoy's own criteria, Mikhailov's portrait of Anna is the most successful artistic creation in the novel, which is itself a portrait, in

words, of the heroine. Tolstoy thus invites us to compare and contemplate the various portraits of Anna presented in and by the text. In addition to the three painted versions and the verbal portraits sketched by other characters, there are Anna's own ekphrastically presented self-portraits, that is, her presentations of her self as an art object. The scenes in which Anna is overtly framed and aestheticized are her first and last public appearances at the ball in Moscow and the opera in Petersburg. The novel contrasts Anna's self-destructive presentation of self as art object (portrait or bust) meant to be admired and desired for its beauty alone with ekphrastic descriptions of Lyovin's painterly visions of the world (landscapes), which become iconic emblems of his spiritual development. If, as Bayley has argued, Anna and Vronsky are poor "artists of life," then Lyovin may be classed with Mikhailov as an artist and art critic who succeeds in incorporating the true spirit of Christianity into his vision of life.

Mikhailov's portrait of Anna, although described in the section of the novel in which it is painted, receives its most sustained ekphrastic treatment in the scene where the novel's two leading protagonists meet, where Lyovin is coerced by his brother-in-law, Stiva, into visiting Anna. Tolstoy has been criticized for failing to exploit the full dramatic potential of this scene; for example, Boris Eikhenbaum characterizes the connection established at Anna's and Lyovin's meeting as a "light dotted line" having no significance for the plot (127). In fact, their meeting inaugurates Lyovin's *Bildung* (*obrazovanie*), achieved through his contemplation of an image or *Bild* (*obraz*). So powerful and crucial is this scene that Joan Grossman has argued that the episode should be regarded as the "keystone" in the arch of *Anna Karenina*,<sup>6</sup> although on purely architectural grounds, the placement of the keystone in this chapter would be asymmetrical to the novel's balanced structure, elegantly diagrammed by Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor. If the scene is not the "keystone" it is nonetheless highly demarcated and circumscribed in the text. Lyovin's viewing of the portrait is multiply framed and deeply imbedded in the narrative; the ornate setting of the portrait and its viewing similarly frames Anna's entrance, which, in turn, is framed by Lyovin's vision of her. The most exterior frame of this episode, the two occasions on which Lyovin and Stiva dine together, neatly bracket the novel structurally and thematically, since both serve as Platonic

<sup>6</sup> In response to a letter criticizing him for lack of structure in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy replied: "I pride myself on the architecture—the arches are so joined that it is impossible even to notice the keystone" (letter to S. A. Rachinsky, 27 January 1878, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* 62: 377). Criticism on *Anna Karenina* has taken up and sustained the metaphor; the most successful work along these lines is that of Stenbock-Fermor, who argues quite convincingly that the "keystone" scene is the Oblonskys' dinner party, also a symposial debate on love and "the woman question."

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symposia where the various types of love are discussed, defined, and, on the second occasion, witnessed. Novelistically and proleptically, the placement of the chapter in the plot serves as an additional frame. As has often been noted, Anna is contiguously and metaphorically located in a brothel, or *teremok* (women's quarters). In terms of temporal sequence, Stiva and Lyovin fulfill the novelistic convention of dinner, drink, cards, and then off to \_\_\_\_\_, a notion Kitty renders explicit in her subsequent argument with Lyovin: "You were drinking at the club, drinking and gambling, and then you went . . . to her of all people!" (732). The setting of the scene itself is seductive: dim lighting, soft carpets, even the *treillage* reminiscent of the trellis work in the traditional Islamic *teremok*, from behind which Anna emerges. It is this context, in addition to what Lyovin knows of Anna's history, that informs his sense of guilt and embarrassment.

In a dialogue with Stiva en route to Anna, Lyovin reaffirms his attitudes towards fallen women and his negative expectations of Anna, framing and stereotyping his projected image of her. The reader is reminded of his disquisition on fallen women in the symmetrically opposed first dinner scene with Stiva: "I have a loathing for fallen women. You're afraid of spiders, and I of these vermin . . . those who know only the nonplatonian love have no need to talk of tragedy. In such love there can be no tragedy" (46).

As in their first dinner discussion, on this occasion Stiva tries again to solicit Lyovin's tolerance for human imperfection. As Stiva and Lyovin ride in the carriage to Anna's, Stiva attempts, in three short narratives, to describe Anna to Lyovin. Stiva's sketches are dialogized by Lyovin's resistance, and by Stiva's own sense of verbal incompetence and their lack of fitness to frame the subject. Not only does Stiva fail to draw a portrait of Anna to his own satisfaction (he concludes each sketch by falling back on, "but you'll see for yourself. . ."); the pictures he presents are unrecognizable to the reader as they introduce new events and actions. The resulting sense of estrangement (*ostranenie*) has the effect of distancing and renewal, so that we, like Lyovin, seem to see Anna for the first time. Stiva begins by describing Anna as "calm and dignified," though the reader last saw her in a state of psychic disintegration, rebelliously flouting social convention at the opera. Stiva then seeks to arouse Lyovin's sympathies by describing Anna's writing of childrens' books, but then immediately negates this portrayal: "But are you imagining she's an authoress? Not at all." Finally, he attempts to present Anna as a "woman with a heart" who has adopted a protégée and her family, a description he proceeds to deconstruct: "It's not philanthropy . . . She saw them, helped them, . . . But not by way of patronage . . . But you'll see for yourself" (724). But prior to seeing

for himself, Lyovin is aided by another, more accurate interpretation of Anna's character: Mikhailov's portrait.

Upon entering Anna's house, Lyovin's first action is to examine his face in the mirror. His face is red, but he denies to himself that he is drunk.<sup>7</sup> Lyovin's second action is to contemplate Mikhailov's portrait of Anna. The juxtaposition of the two "portraits," one "real" in a mirror, the other so real it steps from its frame, reinforces our sense of Anna and Lyovin as alter egos, a view buttressed by the novel's structure, which continually juxtaposes parallel events from these two characters' lives. In psychoanalytic terms,<sup>8</sup> the act of viewing the "other" necessarily involves the projection of self; the conflation of portrait with reflection is emphasized here linguistically by the description of a "reflector" lamp (*lampa-refraktor*) which overhangs Anna's portrait, suggesting the double function of illumination and reflection. Lyovin's presence as the observer in the text mirrors the reader's role as voyeur and introduces the implicit comparison of Mikhailov's painted portrait with Tolstoy's verbal one; the ultimate effect of the framing of the heroine is to focus our attention, to estrange us from our familiar interiorized relationship to Anna in order to see her through others' eyes. This makes Lyovin's mental transformation before the painting all the more effective.

Lyovin's *Bildung* consists of his acceptance of human, specifically

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<sup>7</sup> We are reminded of David Copperfield who, on the occasion of his first debauchery, studies his face in the mirror and concludes that only his hair looks drunk. I am indebted to Professor Elizabeth Beaujour for drawing my attention to another intertext for this passage, Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground*, where the Underground Man pauses before consummating his purchase at the brothel, and glances in the mirror. True to his perverse, reverse logic, recognition of his drunken, disheveled state gives way to an overcompensating narcissism: "I caught sight of myself in a mirror. My agitated face seemed to me repulsive in the extreme: pale, vicious, mean, with tangled hair. 'All right, I'm glad of it,' I thought; 'I'm glad to seem repulsive to her; I like that . . .'"

Looking into a mirror suggests self-examination and the awakening of the conscience, as well as psychic dissociation, or projection, the emergence of the uncanny twin or other. Other characters in the novel also look into mirrors, or refuse to do so, as Dolly does when she visits Anna at Vronsky's country estate. In a critical scene in the novel, Anna looks into a mirror and does not recognize herself.

<sup>8</sup> Freud's theories of the scopophilic drives, voyeurism and exhibitionism, as developed in his 1915 essay, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," were later re-worked by Lacan in his concepts of the "mirror phase" and the "Gaze." The Lacanian theory of the unconscious discourse of the "Gaze" is a system of shifts or alternations between voyeurism and exhibitionism. The voyeur refuses to be seen as an object and attempts to assume power through visual dominance, while the exhibitionist refuses to "be shown" or to "see" and is similarly dogmatic in determining the rejection of the visual field. Lyovin's role as a voyeur and Anna's exhibitionism in the public arena and with Vronsky have been clearly demonstrated in these pages. Anna's habit of "screwing up her eyes" ("refusing to see") contrasts with Lyovin's later "screwing up his eyes" trying to see more clearly. The implications of these psychoanalytic concepts for the novel are too complex to treat fully here.

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feminine imperfection, as expressed in his attitude towards “those vermin,” fallen women, whom he has traditionally and conventionally stereotyped as vulgar, lower-class, uneducated, and lacking the capacity for suffering or consciousness. His prejudice is well-described by Anna, who thus defines Stiva’s views on women to Dolly:

I know how men like Stiva look at it. . . Their own home and wife are sacred to them. Somehow or other these [fallen] women are looked on with contempt by them. . . They draw a sort of line that can’t be crossed between them and their families. (76)

Lyovin’s vision of Anna, a woman of high society, with a complex and sensitive character, necessarily breaks the frame of his own expectations and provokes in him not the feeling of disgust he had anticipated, but “a tenderness and pity which surprised him” (729). What brings about the birth of compassion and tolerance for human frailty and imperfection, a capacity for forgiveness which is the beginning of true faith on Lyovin’s part? It is not simply a case of physical attraction, although Lyovin is by no means immune to Anna’s attempt to “arouse in Lyovin a feeling of love” (733); yet even in this response we must ask if the resulting feeling is that of *eros* or *agape*. Lyovin’s first examination of the portrait of a fallen woman of high society, coming immediately on the heels of his glimpse of his own guilty face “caught in the act,” diminishes his self-righteousness and harsh judgment of others, and produces the requisite sense of humility. And then, the portrait itself immediately enchants Lyovin:

He could not tear himself away from it. He positively forgot where he was and not even hearing what was said, he could not take his eyes off the marvellous portrait. It was not a picture, but a living, charming woman, with black curling hair, with bare arms and shoulders, with a pensive smile on lips covered with soft down; triumphantly and softly she looked at him with eyes that baffled him. (725)

Lyovin is captivated, not only by the exceptionally lifelike quality of the portrait, not only by its beauty, but by the mysterious expression of Anna’s eyes, a mystery perhaps implying the “inner” life of the subject, which can only be represented enigmatically.<sup>9</sup> In its act of framing, the portrait paradoxically shows what cannot be framed. Lyovin’s vision of Anna is expanded rather than contained by the portrait, although when Anna first appears to Lyovin, she appears as “the very woman of the portrait . . . with the same perfection of beauty which the artist had caught . . .” (725). But when Lyovin recognizes

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<sup>9</sup> Recent feminist criticism of the representation of women in art argues that “women cannot be represented as themselves, since we cannot know their identities. They are simply present as a consciousness of being perceived and represented as objects. Hence the duplicitous mystery of women in portraits whose gaze outward is really turned inward on themselves” (Heilbrun and Higonnet xx).

the disjunction between the Anna before him and the character of the ideal Anna in the portrait he begins to appreciate and to commiserate with her agony:

her face, suddenly taking on a hard expression, looked as if it were turned to stone. With that expression on her face she was more beautiful than ever; but the expression was new; it was utterly unlike that expression, radiant with happiness and creating happiness, which had been caught by the painter in her portrait. *Lyovin looked once more at the portrait and at her figure . . . and he felt for her a tenderness and pity which surprised him.* (729, emphasis added)

By the end of the evening during which he

all the while was thinking of her inner life, trying to divine her feelings . . . though he had judged her so severely hitherto, now *by some strange chain of reasoning* he was justifying her and also sorry for her . . . (730, emphasis added)

It is the portrait that leads Lyovin to wonder at the mysteries of Anna's spiritual or inner life, and thus to recognize the conflict and agony she endures. Lyovin reaches this understanding by "some strange chain of reasoning" which is not reason at all but intuition and empathy, stimulated by contemplation of a true work of art that gives him insight. In a similar way, Vronsky had earlier marvelled that Mikhailov, without knowing Anna, had managed to portray her soul:

"One has to know and love her as I have loved her to discover the very sweetest expression of her soul," Vronsky thought, though *it was only from the portrait that he had himself learned* the sweetest expression of her soul. (501, emphasis added)

Lyovin's revelation before Anna's portrait initiates the spiritual conversion he will achieve by the novel's close: his acceptance of an intuitive faith, not based on reason; his recognition of and tolerance for the imperfection of human life and his resulting compassion. In this sense, Mikhailov's portrait fulfills Tolstoy's requisite for true Christian art: that it unite people in compassionate love.

Lyovin's viewing of Mikhailov's portrait of Anna is contrasted to an earlier scene where a portrait of Anna is also contemplated by a man sitting in judgment on her. In the chapter following Anna's revelation to Karenin of her liaison with Vronsky, Karenin attempts to pursue his usual evening's diversions after having written Anna a letter requiring her to continue their married life as before. He attempts to read a French work on the Eugubine tables, but finds himself unable to concentrate, and instead contemplates his wife's portrait:

Over the armchair there hung in a gold frame an oval portrait of Anna, a fine painting by a celebrated artist. Aleksey Aleksandrovich glanced at it. The *unfathomable eyes* gazed ironically and insolently at him. Insufferably insolent and challenging was the effect, in Aleksey Aleksandrovich's eyes, of the black lace about the head, admirably done by the painter, the black hair and handsome white hand with one finger lifted, covered with

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rings. After looking at the portrait for a minute, Aleksey Aleksandrovich shuddered, so that his lips quivered, and uttered the sound “brrr.” (301, emphasis added)

Karenin proceeds to solve, not the mystery of his wife’s “unfathomable gaze” which he now interprets as insolence, nor the (for him) unsolvable mystery of the Eugubine tables, but “a complication that had arisen in his official life” (301). Anna, like the Eugubine tables, remains a cipher.<sup>10</sup>

The effect of the black lace about the head and the “insolent” expression both recall Anna’s earlier appearance at the ball and predict her later fatal appearance at the opera. In both public appearances, Anna is depicted as an aesthetic object, framed by her attire. At the ball,

Anna was not in lilac, as Kitty had so urgently wished, but in a black, low-cut, velvet gown, showing her full shoulders and bosom that looked as though *carved of old ivory*, and her rounded arms, with tiny, slender wrists. The whole gown was trimmed with Venetian lace. In her black hair, all her own, was a little wreath of pansies, and there were more of the same in the black ribbon winding through the white lace encircling her waist. Her coiffure was not striking. All that was noticeable were the little wilful tendrils of her curly hair that would always break free about her neck and temples. Around her finely *chiseled*, strong neck was a thread of pearls. . . Now [Kitty] understood that Anna could not have been in lilac, and that her charm was just that *she always stood out from her attire*, that her dress could never be conspicuous on her. And her black dress, with its sumptuous lace, was not conspicuous on her; *it was only the frame and all that was seen was she . . .* (85, emphases added)

In contrast to Anna, who is presented both as a chiselled ivory statue and as a work of art within a frame, Kitty’s own attire is part and parcel of her character, “as if she had been born in that tulle and lace, with her hair done up high on her head and a rose and two leaves on the top of it” (83). Despite the apparent “natural” quality of Anna’s coiffure and toilette, the reader recognizes, with some irony at Kitty’s expense, what the more experienced Dolly will later understand as she examines Anna’s gown: “Anna had put on a very simple batiste dress. Dolly scrutinized that simple dress attentively. She knew what it meant, and the price at which such simplicity was obtained” (645). It is a supreme artistry which creates the impression of being natural, whereas only genuine innocence could render the frills and furbelows of Kitty’s

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<sup>10</sup> The Eugubine tables, written in an undeciphered North Umbrian dialect, were discovered in 1444 in Eugubium, Italy. Interestingly, the treatise Karenin is reading is in French. Like Vronsky’s portrait of Anna in Italian costume in French style, Karenin’s portrait of Anna is “coded” in Italian and “framed” by the the French language. I am indebted to Pamela R. Bleisch of the UCLA Classics Department for drawing my attention to the function of the Eugubine tables in this passage.

attire natural.<sup>11</sup>

Anna's conscious presentation of herself as an aesthetic object is even more pronounced in the later scene where she attends the opera. As in the ballroom scene and in the portrait contemplated by Karenin, lace is again the framing feature. In fact, this scene becomes an enactment of the features Karenin sees in the portrait, while Vronsky's role and reactions throughout this chapter parallel Karenin's in earlier scenes between Anna and her husband. Vronsky now assumes Karenin's role as Anna becomes a "closed book" (or cipher) to him.

He looked at her with searching eyes, but she responded with that defiant, half-mirthful, half-desperate look, *the meaning of which he could not comprehend*. . . Anna was already dressed in a low necked gown of light silk and velvet that she had had made in Paris, with costly white lace on her head that *framed her face* and was particularly becoming, *setting off her dazzling beauty*. (569, emphases added)

In the following exchange, Vronsky, "appealing to her exactly as her husband once had done" (570), feels an increasing hostility towards Anna as his sense of respect for her diminishes, "although his sense of her beauty was intensified" (570). After pursuing her to the opera, Vronsky watches as Anna upstages the diva, framed by the proscenium of her opera box:

Vronsky . . . caught sight of Anna's head, proud, strikingly beautiful, *and smiling in the frame of lace*. *The setting of her head* . . . reminded him of her just as he had seen her at the ball in Moscow. But he felt utterly different toward her beauty now. In his feeling for her now there was no element of mystery, and so her beauty, though it attracted him even more intensely than before, now offended him too. (573, emphasis added)

Vronsky feels no sense of mystery, although he has never understood Anna less than at this moment, when he is ignorant of her tragic meeting with her son, and cannot comprehend her behavior. What Vronsky sees in Anna's self-portrait is the presentation of beauty without barriers to the sexual knowledge he has of her; as a result, his aesthetic experience of Anna is empty and superficial, virtually pornographic, and therefore offensive.

Such a reading is defensible when we recall Tolstoy's later dictum

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<sup>11</sup> Stenbock-Fermor has argued that Anna's concern for her clothes increases immediately following her meeting with Vronsky. However, Anna had already brought with her the ball gown and highly composed toilette she wears to the ball in Moscow. In earlier variants of the novel, Anna is unprepared for the ball and Dolly and Kitty loan Anna lace and themselves create Anna's costume. These passages were excised from the later version, showing us an Anna of consummate artistic technique, far beyond anything Kitty could imagine. Thus, when Kitty envisions Anna in lilac at the ball, Anna is amused ("Why lilac particularly?"), as she has already prepared her highly sophisticated black ensemble. A close examination of Anna's attire throughout the novel always yields a glimpse of elaborate embroidery, elegant styling, opulent jewelry, beinged fingers, etc.



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in *What Is Art?* that true art requires no ornament or technique, while false art relies on convention and decorations. In his famous analogy, Tolstoy argues:

Strange as the comparison may sound, what has happened to the art of our circle and time is what happens to a woman who sells her womanly attractiveness, intended for maternity, for the pleasure of those who desire such pleasures.

The art of our time and of our circle has become a prostitute. . . . Like her, it is not limited to certain times, like her it is always adorned, like her it is always saleable, and like her it is enticing and ruinous. . .

Real art, like the wife of an affectionate husband, needs no ornaments. But counterfeit art, like a prostitute, must always be decked out. (172-73)

Anna as fallen woman may thus be contrasted to Dolly, who is concerned for her appearance only as the mother of her children: “Now she did not dress for her own sake, nor for the sake of her own beauty, but simply so that, as the mother of those exquisite creatures [her children] she might not spoil the general effect” (278). Despite her lack of feminine vanity, however, Dolly is no stranger to the impulse to be aestheticized in a picture. Thus, when Lyovin meets her bathing with her children,

she was especially glad he should see her in all her glory. No one was able to appreciate her grandeur better than Lyovin. Seeing her, he found himself face to face with one of the *pictures of family life his imagination painted*. (282, emphasis added)

When Dolly exclaims, “How glad I am to see you!” the reader easily discerns that her pleasure is not in seeing, but in being seen by Lyovin in a flattering picture.

In contrast to Dolly’s and Anna’s narcissistic self-portraits, Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna is transcendent. The revelatory effect of Anna’s portrait on Lyovin is reminiscent of his response to a vision of Kitty earlier in the novel, a vision which, like the portrait of Anna, constitutes an *ekphrasis* and radically revises his world view. Following a night spent with the peasants after the harvest, during which Lyovin experiences a false epiphany and considers marrying a peasant woman, he catches a glimpse of Kitty travelling to her estate, framed by the window of her carriage:

At the window, evidently only just awake, sat a young girl holding in both hands the ribbons of a white cap. With a face full of light and thought, *full of a subtle, complex inner life* that was remote from Lyovin, she was gazing beyond him at the glow of the sunrise. (293, emphasis added)

Lyovin, struck by this portrait of Kitty, realizes the full falsity of his previous night’s epiphany and acknowledges that the solution to the mystery of his life rests with her.

Whenever Lyovin attempts to find solutions to his philosophical

dilemmas, he creates pictures by framing the vision of the real world before him and using it as an emblem or icon of his thoughts and experience. Thus, in his *rodomontade* in the passage preceding his vision of Kitty, Lyovin observes a “strange mother-of-pearl shell of fleecy white cloudlets” (293) in the sky, which he “takes as a symbol of [his] ideas and feelings” (294) concerning the formation of his new views of life: “Just now I looked at the sky and there was nothing in it—only two white streaks. Yes, and so imperceptibly too my views of life changed!” Similarly, on the morning of his betrothal to Kitty, “what Lyovin saw then he never saw again” (424): a fortuitous, synchronic composition of birds, freshly baked loaves, and children at play, drawn into an icon or painting which crystallizes his spiritual state of ecstasy.

In the earlier passage, after Kitty’s carriage disappears over the horizon, Lyovin glances at the sky to find the shell has gone: “There in the remote heights above, a mysterious change had been accomplished. There was no trace of a shell, and there was stretched over fully half of the sky an even cover of tiny and ever tinier cloudlets” (294). Both images, the shell and the cover, are suggestive of containment; physical exteriors that embody spiritual essences, and thus incorporate the theme of representation. Lyovin accepts his vision of the constantly changing sky as an emblem of the natural law of flux, of constant change and variation, of the impossibility of fixing the world and himself in an eternal state of perfection. This recognition makes possible his later acceptance of life as spiritual struggle in an ongoing process, and of himself as an imperfect creature with the impulse towards perfecting himself. At the close of the novel, he accepts not only this fact but also his own flawed nature, which needs to try to preserve moments in a “frozen,” “framed” state. Lyovin’s final epiphanic visions contrast with the “moving pictures” Anna views through the frame of her carriage window en route to her suicide: she interprets these pictures as profane projections of the vanity fair and cartoonish illustrations of unmitigated human greed and self-delusion. Unaware of her own hermeneutic action of framing and reading, Anna accepts her frame of mind as the objective truth and the candlelight by which she reads her “book filled with troubles, falsehoods, sorrow, and evil” (799) as the ultimate and final illumination.

By contrast, Lyovin, at the novel’s conclusion, acknowledges both the dangers of framing and the potential for salvation in such visions. Once he recognizes the limitations of earthbound visions, he can allow his aesthetic organization of the world into symbolizing landscapes to enhance his non-rational, intuitive approach to faith without deforming his insight. Tolstoy thus restates the Kantian definition of the sublime. Lyovin’s final epiphanic picture of the sky is bounded and framed by

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his awareness of the limiting frame and his appreciation of the beauty it encloses:

Lying on his back, he gazed up now into the high cloudless sky. "Do I not know that that is infinite space, and that it is not a rounded vault? But, however I screw up my eyes and strain my sight, I cannot see it but as round and finite, and in spite of my knowing about infinite space, I am incontestably right when I see a firm blue vault, far more right than when I strain my eyes to see beyond it." (833)

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